



Dear Mr. Monk

January 3, 1961

Mr. Thelonious Monk
243 West 63rd Street, Apt. 20
New York, New York

Dear Mr. Monk

Allen Ginsberg tells me that he has spoken to you about our mushroom research. We find that they do great things for talented people and we are going to continue giving them to people in the arts and learned professions.

I should like very much to talk to you about our research, and tell you about our results so far. I'll be in New York the weekend of January 14th and shall give you a ring.

I have followed your work with respect and pleasure and look forward to talking with you.

Sincerely yours,
Timothy Leary

While Leary's colleagues Richard Alpert and Frank Barron and a growing cadre of Harvard graduate students were busy analyzing data from individual report forms given as follow-ups to each psilocybin session, Leary was taking cues and

introductions from Ginsberg that would forward the cultural portion of their research. Thelonious Monk was only one of the artists they would pull in—they would eventually give psilocybin to Dizzy Gillsepie's whole band.

Ginsberg gave Leary addresses and references for a rich cross-section of artists, writers, musicians, publishers, bohemians, and intellectually engaged New Yorkers. Leary sent out letters to these people on Harvard University stationery, and Ginsberg eased the way with more casual conversation and correspondence. Between the two of them, they framed the mushroom sessions with an air of scientific (and Ivy League) legitimacy as well as the furor of cutting-edge artistic and spiritual urgency. It was a powerful one-two punch, and most who were approached were interested in taking a whirl on the mushroom-go-round.

On January 13, 1961, Jack Kerouac took psilocybin along with Leary at Ginsberg's apartment on the Lower East Side. Peter Orlovsky and Bob Donlin—a poet friend of Ginsberg and Kerouac who appears in Kerouac's writing as Bob Donnelly—also ate the mushroom pills. It was decided that Ginsberg would abstain so that he could be their curandero.

Kerouac was fresh off his last major journey through America. His zeitgeist-setting 1957 masterpiece, *On the Road*, had, for better and worse, already made him a major American celebrity. The progression from being lauded in the *New York Times* to being parodied and mocked on television and in print was a rapid, jarring one and had deepened Kerouac's dependency on alcohol. In June 1960 Jack had endured the movie adaptation of his novel *The Subterraneans*. Predictably, Jack's raw, lyrical and powerful account of a true episode from his life had been turned

into a cheesy, sensationalistic Hollywood movie in which Kerouac was portrayed by a lackluster George Peppard. Jack responded to the movie by shutting himself away in his mother's house for two months and drinking. In July, he decided to make a last-ditch effort to right himself both physically and mentally. Lawrence Ferlinghetti had offered Jack use of his little cabin near Big Sur in a serene ocean-side setting called Bixby Canyon. Kerouac was to go there and gather himself by chopping wood, meditating, staying away from booze, and writing. Instead, the trip turned into a harrowing personal hell alternating between drunken forays into San Francisco and alcoholic horrors and hallucinations in the woods. Kerouac would record the trip in his most heart-wrenching book, *Big Sur*.

When Leary met him at Ginsberg's apartment roughly six months after his Big Sur trip, Kerouac was already drunk. Their shared New England upbringings and passion for sports (Kerouac would dub Leary "Coach") created an immediate bond between the two men. However, Leary also detected a deep sadness in Kerouac. "Jack Kerouac was scary. Behind the dark good looks of a burly lumberjack was a New England mill-town sullenness, Canuck-Catholic soggy distrust. This is one unhappy kid, I thought." Leary was also intimidated by Kerouac's celebrity and his overbearing drunken persona. Early on in their trip, Leary withdrew into Ginsberg's bedroom in despair. "Kerouac had propelled me into my first negative trip. Maybe it was the drabness of the slum, so different from our carefully prepared session rooms. Perhaps it was jittery New York itself, never a town for serene philosophers. Or was it Kerouac's French-Catholic gloom? Anyway, I went down."

Much as Leary had rescued Ginsberg during his first

trip at Harvard, now Ginsberg fulfilled his curandero role by pulling Leary out of his downward spiral. Tim rebounded, and the next twelve hours were spent talking, goofing, laughing, and tripping in Ginsberg's apartment. Kerouac still dominated the evening, but he did it in a playful, Zen way that Leary came to appreciate. He would later write to Allen that he had even taken to incorporating some of Kerouac's swagger and antics into his own classroom teaching. More important though, the trip had taught Leary further lessons on the importance of set and setting. Leary wrote to Ginsberg, "Learned a lot from you and the last weekend in NYC with Jack. Have run several agapes recently and it's so clear—when I'm detached and doing it out of duty, trying to [be] conscientious curandero etc then it gets scattered. When I or someone else present is battereied [*sic*] up with huge charges of energy and love and goodfeeling etc then it swings godly. Also a small room with doors closed adds to the good."

As for Kerouac's experience, Allen had reminded him that Leary was gathering reports after each person's trip, and certainly a report from Jack Kerouac was a major score for the Psilocybin Project. Rather than file a traditional report, Kerouac put his reflections into letter form using his "spontaneous prose" approach to sketch out his impressions. In this letter to Leary—whom he addresses as "Coach"—he details both the positives and the negatives of his mushroom experience.

Among the positives Jack notes: "Mainly I felt like a floating Khan on a magic carpet with my interesting lieutenants and gods . . . some ancient feeling about old geheuls [*sic*] in the grass, and temples, exactly also like the sensation I got drunk on pulque floating in the Xochimilco

gardens on barges laden with flowers and singers . . . some old Golden Age dream of man, very nice.”

Among the negatives: “The bad physical side-effects involved (for me) stiffening of elbow and knee joints, a swelling of the eyelid, shortness of breath or rather anxiety about breathing itself. No heart palpitations like in mescaline, however.”

Kerouac also reported positive lingering effects that continued beyond the initial mushroom trip. “In fact I came home and had the first serious long talk with my mother, for 3 days and 3 nights (not consecutive) but we sat talking about everything yet went about the routine of washing, sleeping, eating, cleaning up the yard and house, and returning to long talk chairs at proper time. That was great. I learned I loved her more than I thought.”

This positive feeling, which he describes as “mushroomy,” continued for a week following his trip, at which point he began his weekend carousing around Northport, where the feeling was kept “alive by drinking Christian Brothers port on the rocks.”

Kerouac concludes his letter: “In sum, also, there is temporary addiction but no withdrawal symptoms whatever. The faculty of remembering names and what one has learned, is heightened so fantastically that we could develop the greatest scholars and scientists in the world with this stuff. . . . There’s no harm in Sacred Mushrooms if taken in moderation as a rule (not the first time, tho) and much good will come of it. (For instance, I remembered historical details I’d completely forgotten before the mushrooms, and names names millions of names and categories and data).”

In short, Kerouac's trip had been a success for him, as well as for Leary and Ginsberg. However, the elder of the Beat inner circle was a tougher sell.

While Kerouac was the most famous of Allen's friends to participate in the early experiments with Leary, William S. Burroughs was the most drug-savvy. With Burroughs' reach into the international avant-garde, both Ginsberg and Leary knew that it would be a coup to get him involved with their doings. On January 5, 1961, Leary sat down and wrote Burroughs a letter. At that time, Burroughs was living in Paris at what came to be known as the Beat Hotel. The Beat Hotel was a typical cheap European rooming house that at different times housed Gregory Corso, Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky, and many other poets and artists, including Brion Gysin. Inspired by Gysin's visual experiments, Burroughs was deep into the "cut-up" experiments that would play a role in many of his most famous pieces of writing. If spontaneous prose was Kerouac's abiding creative technique, then cut-ups were Burroughs'. Even before he put that name to the experiments, Burroughs was never one for orderly, linear writing. When Allen Ginsberg arrived to visit Burroughs in Tangier in 1957 he found the middle-aged writer living in a cluttered room surrounded by pages and pages of "routines" (another Burroughsian literary conceit). Burroughs would write his prose while high on kif, morphine, majoun (a candy-like confection of fruits, nuts, honey, spices, and THC), or whatever else was handy, and when he came to the end of a page, he'd simply flip it onto the ground and load another one into the typewriter. Where Kerouac had tackled the single-page limitations of a typewriter by taping his pages together or, eventually, working on long rolls of teletype paper, Burroughs simply